Building a Strong Profession of Educators

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I want to share with you my thoughts on the condition of teaching in this country. I will elaborate on the structure of preparation that exists across the fifty states—where we have been, and where we are today. At various points, I will compare the preparation and development of teachers with that of other professions. I want to spend more time, however, on what we need to do if we want to build a truly strong profession. My central argument for improving American education is to build a system that attends to the capacity of professional educators to be as effective as they can be in educating all students on a consistent basis. I call for greater coherence and consistency across teacher preparation and development programs based on what works and on what we have learned about the art, science, and craft of teaching, and on what conditions support effective learning outcomes for all students.

First, let me discuss what characterizes a strong profession. Drawing on the thoughts of Ellen Lagemann, former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, who in turn drew from Andrew Abbott of the University of Chicago, strong professions are able to certify the competence of their members to act more effectively in their practice. They may do so through a systematic training program, which ensures that would-be professionals experience a similar curriculum and similar pedagogies. Ellen Lagemann has observed, for example, that the use of the case method as an instructional tool, although commonly used among various professional schools, varies in terms of its approach and purpose. In her experiences at Harvard, she observed that the law school used cases that were actual legal opinions. Students would read them and professors would use a Socratic
method of questioning, which forced them to reason to the legal precedent set by a case. At the business school, the faculty used cases that described “real world” problems in business, government, or the nonprofit sector, and students were first asked to analyze those problems in study groups and then asked to provide solutions to the problems at hand. At the medical school, cases were very short, often only a paragraph. The cases were given to medical students, who immediately pooled whatever they knew and did not know about the situation. They then agreed on who would do research about specific unresolved questions and then came together to pool and refine their knowledge. All of these uses of the case method involved different ways of thinking and acting. The law school is teaching students to reason from precedent—to think like lawyers. The business school is teaching students to gather information, make decisions, and take action—to act like managers. The medical school is teaching students how to diagnose an illness—to reason like doctors. What would be a key signature pedagogy for preparing teachers? What does it mean to think and act like a teacher? The answers to those questions can contribute to the development of a strong teaching profession.

Second, strong professions exercise considerable influence in the governance of the domain in which they work. The medical profession is an example of a strong profession. Through the American Medical Association and other professional associations, doctors have considerable influence over health-care policy. Admittedly, they are not alone, given health insurance companies, nurses and other health professionals, pharmaceutical companies, and consumer groups, which represent many different segments of the population. However, by definition, strong professions tend to have more power than competing groups.

What is the state of the teaching profession regarding its role in certifying competence, and how much influence does it exert in the governance of the profession?

In this country, what is the state of teachers and their preparation? It is a mixed picture. On the one hand, we have never known as much as we do today about what encompasses effective teaching. We know as much as we ever have about teaching children at various levels, from different backgrounds and living conditions. The cognitive sciences are shedding light on teaching practices that, when used appropriately, can yield improved learning. This growing knowledge about effective teaching, however, is not taught on a consistent basis in teacher preparation programs across the
country. The preparation that a prospective teacher receives varies from institution to institution, department to department, and state to state. The preparation may have been part of an undergraduate education program or a graduate program. The clinical component to the program may vary from virtually nonexistent to very extensive. Or the prospective teacher may have gone through an alternative-route program that varies quite markedly from others across the country. As a result, where one lives, studies, and works has a bearing on the caliber of teacher.

On the question of the quality of prospective teacher candidates, we can look at various national trends. For example, over the last decade, national studies have shown that those preparing to enter teaching have slightly higher grade point averages than non-education students.

The average teacher has taken more college classes than in the past. The master's degree is now required for permanent certification of teachers in most states, with upwards of 56 percent of public school teachers now holding master's degrees, compared with 27 percent in 1971. Fewer teachers are left to sink or swim in their first years of teaching. It is now more likely that a teacher will receive some support as part of an induction program. The quality, of course, varies, but it is definitely more common than in the past to have some form of induction.

Nationally, teachers take most of their courses in the liberal arts and subject matter disciplines. Elementary teachers take more education courses at the undergraduate level than do secondary teachers. However, there is great variation among states. The requirements for gaining a teaching license vary quite a bit from one state to another. In some states, the curriculum for prospective teachers is prescribed, including some form of supervised student teaching. In other states, a teacher can be licensed with neither a major nor a minor in the field and a minimum of supervised teaching. There are multiple requirements for teachers to become and remain certified and licensed to teach, including different types of tests and assessments. Passing one or more exams is a common requirement for initial teacher licensure. Assessment requirements vary across states in terms of the type of test administered and the required passing score.

The pattern of preparation usually includes an approved course of study that incorporates supervised teaching. The preparation can be located in a large public research university, a private university, a small liberal arts college, or a state college with a normal school history. The resources that each of these
settings has at its disposal vary greatly. Some states require a written competency examination. Most of these are testing basic math and verbal skills at a less-than-rigorous level. States often require other exams, such as Praxis or something customized for the state, like those developed by Evaluation Systems. Even if states use the same exam, they will likely set different passing scores that can vary widely from state to state. Of the twenty-one states that have some sort of pedagogical examination for initial state licensure, the passing score range varies up to twenty-nine points depending on the teaching level (elementary, middle, or high school) and the particular state. Thus, a prospective teacher could pass the test comfortably in one state and fail the same test in another state. Policymakers seem to operate as if potential teachers reside in their state and will never go anywhere else. The reality is that teacher graduates go where the jobs are. Some states are export states, which produce teacher graduates that are hired by neighboring states. Other states do not produce enough teachers and have to import teachers from other places. Depending on the neighboring state, these teachers may have great difficulty transferring their credentials due to the differing requirements, because every state likes to believe that their standards are better than those of any other state.

On top of all this is the rise of alternative routes to teacher certification, which come in different shapes and sizes and provide a back-door entry for teacher candidates. It would not be fair to generalize about these programs because some are well designed, but many others are poorly designed and built on a view of teaching that does not recognize the complexities of effective practice, suggesting that anyone can do it. Education stands as an outlier among professions in allowing its practitioners to operate independently before they are licensed and to circumvent traditional preparation programs.

A contributing factor to the wide range of licensing requirements is the fact that states have very different governance models for making policy decisions. They tend to boil down to four basic models. The first model, which applies to twelve states, has the governor appointing the state board of education, and the state board appointing the chief state school officer. A second model has an elected state board of education, which appoints the chief state school officer. Eight states do this. A third model has a governor-appointed state board of education and an elected chief state school officer. Eleven states do this. A fourth model, with nine states, has the governor appointing both the state board of education and the chief state school
officer. The ten remaining states use some modified version of the four models, including not having a state board or having a board that is advisory only. The result of these many approaches to educational governance is a political process that produces a range of regulations from loose to very prescriptive. I am not here to recommend the one best model—only to say that different models can yield very different results.

What I am describing is a profession that is dominated by variation. Variation is not necessarily a bad thing; in fact, variation can provide an opportunity for innovation, experimentation, and creative approaches. However, variation without rationale or evidence that a specific approach is justified and yields better results is problematic. In the case of teacher preparation and development, variation in design has resulted in variation in quality. The bottom line is that students across the country are being taught by teachers who have an uneven set of knowledge, preparation, and skills, which may not best serve all students, given the wide variation in contexts and needs.

Now compare what I just described with what occurs in other professions. When setting out to become an accountant, a student can expect that no matter where he or she attends school, there will be a core curriculum, with a bit of variation on the margins; the basic curriculum and pedagogical approach, however, will be quite consistent from one school to another and one state to another. After all, if these graduates are planning to take the CPA exam, which is a national test, there would need to be close alignment of the school’s curriculum with what is contained on the exam. The accounting profession periodically goes through a process of updating the exam based on a thorough analysis of the nature of the job of accountants and the knowledge, skills, and ethical standards expected in a changing world.

The field of law has evolved from one in which every law school decided its own curriculum to one in which the profession took charge and determines what is appropriate. Regardless of the state or law school, there is a standard pedagogical approach to preparing lawyers. The use of case studies and a particular method of inquiry develops particular habits of mind and analytical skills that the profession has determined are appropriate for the profession. Because laws can differ from state to state, there is a hybrid approach to the bar exam in which one component is a multistate national exam and another component is a state-specific assessment. States can weight portions of the assessment differently, determine different passing
scores, and use their own state-based scorers. The result is that some state bar exams are harder to pass than others, but the general preparation for a lawyer is remarkably consistent no matter where one goes to law school.

In the field of medicine, there is more consistency than variation in the training of doctors. The development of the medical workforce is seen as a national issue, where premed coursework can take place at any college or university, graduate medical school somewhere else if desired, and internship and residency in perhaps a third location. Assignments of where a doctor will serve a residency are determined based on a national process. The medical training and the assessment of the prospective doctor are laid out in a staged fashion. In an early stage, for example, content knowledge is assessed as part of the foundation for all doctors. As their training moves to later stages, doctors go through computer-based simulations, then more realistic simulations, with actors playing the part of patients. All this is experienced in a cohort fashion under the tutelage of trained, experienced medical doctors who are both professors and practitioners. Teaching hospitals become the training grounds for an extensive clinical experience. Medical training also has its pedagogical approaches that are consistent no matter where one goes to medical school. The use of general and specialized protocols, decision trees, and team problem solving is developed in each setting. The use of grand medical rounds in which doctors rotate through a series of experiences is a signature pedagogical approach that is a well-developed learning tool to give doctors a broad comprehensive clinical experience.

In these examples, I am describing the evolution of professions that have gradually moved in the direction of professional agreement around the preparation and development of a professional. All professions at some point in their development have worked to achieve professional consensus about the key elements of a professional education, which become the building blocks for all who choose to enter the profession. In medicine, this happened following the release of the Flexner Report in 1910, which led to the reform of medical education. Over time the medical field has come to develop a common preparation experience with a set of protocols and routines that, blended with clinical judgment, are characteristics of a true profession. Engineering and architecture also moved in this direction in the middle of the twentieth century.

This evolution leading to agreement around the preparation and development of practitioners in the professions I’ve described is needed for
the teaching profession if we are to make true progress. In each of these examples, the profession itself took responsibility for determining the appropriate training necessary to practice. The quality of that determination made it possible for states and localities to have enough confidence to defer to the judgment of the accounting, legal, and medical professions. Though there are state boards that issue licenses as well as revoke licenses for misconduct and other ethical and legal issues, states are not as involved in determining the curriculum or specific training required of other professionals in their state; they have placed that in the trust of the particular profession. Teaching is the exception. As long as state policymakers have a hand in issues of curriculum and training and testing requirements, we will continue to have great variation across the country, with at least fifty different approaches to preparing teachers.

We collectively have to accept responsibility for the condition in which we find ourselves. We have not taken the difficult but necessary steps of coming to professional consensus on what constitutes effective practice in the field of teaching. Instead, under the banner of academic freedom, we insist on variation, with skimpy empirical evidence to support our approach.

What gives me hope for the future? There are trends in the field that hold promise for positive movement in our profession. In the last twenty-five years, there have been attempts to work collectively toward some agreement on goals for the profession. These include the work of the Holmes Partnership, which has gone out of existence; John Goodlad’s National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER); the Renaissance Network; the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE); and Project 30—all attempts by higher education networks to improve the teacher education field. In addition, there have been attempts to develop policy mechanisms that states can adopt. These include the InTASC approach to developing common assessment standards for entry into the profession, and the series of exams by testing companies to measure teacher skills. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), the National Research Council (NRC), and the National Academy of Education (NAEd) have all contributed to our thinking on a common curriculum for teachers.

At the institutional level, the most logical lever for improvement is the accreditation process. Whether one agrees with NCATE’s approach or the
one used by the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC), this can be an important tool toward reaching agreement on a set of standards that states and institutions can be confident about in terms of setting an acceptable bar for educator preparation. A promising new development is the unification of the two national accreditation bodies, NCATE and TEAC, to become the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), a concerted attempt by the field to come to professional agreement on approaches to national accreditation. This will signal to states and institutions that there is agreement around standards that the profession has adopted. Accreditation is an important tool used by other professions. In fact, prospective professionals in other professions would not consider going to an unaccredited school. In education, however, this has not been the case, because a graduate of an unaccredited school has no problem being hired by a school district. In fact, it is not a typical question that is asked by an employing school system. The average educator may not even know if a school is accredited because it has never mattered. We have to make it matter, as it does in other professions.

This is where we come in. Perhaps we can be a part of a process that leads to professional agreement on effective practice.

In other professions, there is usually an independent body that draws from the best thinking and research in the field to develop a set of standards and assessments that will ensure some level of accountability. I can envision a similar scenario in which an entity like CAEP develops a set of standards for institutions, and an entity like NBPTS develops a set of standards and assessments for individual practitioners at various stages of their careers. In order for the standards to be professionally acceptable, publicly credible, administratively feasible, legally defensible, and economically affordable, the process for determining standards must be well thought out, and the evidence collected to assess whether standards have been met must be meaningful and linked to performance outcomes. That is exactly what NBPTS sets out to do.

In looking at the history of NBPTS, an attempt was made to be as inclusive as possible—that is, the development of the standards for determining what accomplished practitioners should know and be able to do was done with the aid of the best minds on the subject in the country and the best research coming from a variety of sources. In other professions, the best minds include practitioners. In architecture, engineering, accounting, medicine, and law, contributors are not limited to professors in that field but include
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practitioners. In fact, professors in those fields are very often also practitioners. We are beginning to see more examples of this in education—what some have called hybrid educators: individuals who have one foot in academia and the other foot in the classroom of real schools. The inclusion of practitioners in the development of standards and assessments is a hallmark of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

Moving forward, I can envision a vehicle like NBPTS that is independent, autonomous, and not controlled by politicians, and that involves scholars, researchers, and practitioners in the development of a professional consensus on a set of standards and fair assessments that measure practice at various stages in one’s career. As standards for particular teaching areas are updated and validated, appropriate links should be made with the most current knowledge on cognition, brain research, and effective pedagogical approaches for different contexts and particular populations as they become accepted into practice for all teachers. As this knowledge is incorporated into assessment of teachers, it would logically be expected that teacher preparation and development programs would be aligned with this new knowledge in the same way that other professions make sure that their programs are aligned with the standards and assessments of their profession so that aspiring professionals can be successful.

The construction of new knowledge about practice exists, but there is not a well-constructed mechanism for transferring this knowledge into a consistent training program for educators. CAEP and NBPTS together could serve as mechanisms for this knowledge transfer. The challenge for us is how to marry these efforts with the other efforts for change that are going on in universities and school systems.

What I am calling for is a more cohesive and consistent knowledge base that is credible, defensible, and organized in a manner that is accessible to practitioners and scholars, and that is built on an open architecture that allows for expansion and revision, which will always be necessary as our knowledge grows.

We can all be part of the solution. If we choose not to, then we will have confirmed what critics say—that the so-called education establishment is unwilling or incapable of reforming itself. We are at a critical point in the development of this profession. We can react, be defensive, and resist the criticisms, which admittedly are unfair generalizations, or we can take the necessary steps that other professions have taken and engage in what I call
collective responsibility. Building a strong profession will take lots of focused and coordinated work, the building blocks for which are currently being laid by various programs across the country. In the long run, our collective action will position the profession to be more responsive to the public it is designed to serve.

The time is ripe for a collective approach to building a strong profession. We cannot delay, because our children and our nation deserve better.

Reference